

Romanian Economic and Business Review – Vol. 1, No. 4**ARTICLES****WELFARE STATE CRISIS AND NEO-LIBERAL IMPOSITION IN ARGENTINA. THE ADMINISTRATIONS OF MENEM AND ALFONSIN***Maria de Monserra T. Llairo****Abstract**

The main aim of this piece is to explain the reasons why there was no continuity in Argentina's economic policy. The political immaturity in the practice of democracy in Argentina led to a bipartisan system as the only way to achieve institutional stability. Both political lines, however, have in their ideas and actions certain concepts and procedures that are inherent to Argentina's unstable political situation.

Introduction

The main aim of this piece is to explain the reasons why there was no continuity in Argentina's economic policy. For the last fifty years, Argentina has had a bipartisan system: Peronism vs. Radicalism. Although there have been other parties, they were mostly minorities lacking power of representation -Socialism, Christian Democracy, Conservatives, and Communism. After the fall of Peron's government (1955), the Argentine society was divided between Peronists and anti-Peronists. The political proscription of Peronism caused not only political instability, but also a crisis in government itself. Instability and crisis characterised the administrations of Dr. Arturo Frondizi (1958-1962) and Dr. Arturo Illia (1963-1966). Both were overthrown by military coups with the consent of political parties, which wanted the proscription on Peronism to continue. This in turn prompted the formation of urban and rural armed groups that helped the social dismemberment, which took the country to endless military coups. This situation inflicted deep cultural and political wounds, which continue to haunt the country even today. The political immaturity in the practice of

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democracy led to a bipartisan system as the only way to achieve institutional stability. Both political lines, however, have in their ideas and actions certain concepts and procedures that are inherent to Argentina's unstable political situation.

The crisis of the old system and the application of neo-liberalism in Argentina

After the third Peronist government (1973-1976) and through the military dictatorship (1976-1982), Peronism suffered a political crisis due to the death of its leader, Juan Domingo Peron (1974). Members of the Peronist Youth and some sectors of the Left, disappointed with the political model applied by Peron, preferred either moderate versions of their ideas or social democracy, for which there was no room in Peronist unionism. Within the party's political structure a "Renovation" was taking place, which sought to update the national and popular doctrine by taking elements from European experiences of Christian Democracy or Social Democratic reformism. The leader of this political line within Peronism was Antonio Cafiero.¹

As these changes were taking place within Peronism, the Union Cívica Radical (UCR - Civic Radical Union) was presenting a more homogeneous political framework, although here too there were two confronting sectors that disagreed about presidential elections. On the one hand, there was Dr. Raul Alfonsín, who worked on new political strategies supported by intellectuals and part of the Radical youth, mostly belonging to centre-left. On the other hand, there was a sector represented by the old and traditional political image of Radicalism, which was weakened by Dr. Ricardo Balbín death.

For the elections of October 1983, Argentina's political outlook was rather confusing. Peronism had lost its strength, showing lack of internal organization and a worn-out political ideal. At the same time, prominent politicians were facing transparency and legitimacy problems in their offices. The legendary liberal Alvaro Alsogaray, who was trying to attract a variety of minority groups that had never succeeded in elections, drew sectors of the Right wing to create a party that would have some power of representation. He formed the UCD (Union del Centro Democrático - Democratic Centre Union), supported by professionals and intellectuals who, following the international trend, favored the new market economy.

¹ It is important to note as well that the unionist leaders were divided in two: those who preferred a fluid communication with the military authorities - the "participationists" - and those who, without taking extreme action, preferred a more aggressive attitude, such as Lorenzo Miguel and Saul Ubaldini (See Di Telia and Torcuato, 1999).

The Left was supported by the PI (Partido Intransigente Intransigent Party), formed by youngsters with a deep revolutionary ideology and led by Oscar Alende¹.

According to the panorama we described, we could say that Radicalism, as compared to the other parties, presented a democratic, tolerant, and ethical attitude, as opposed to what was offered by its peers.

The goal of this piece is to show that deep institutional, political, economic, and social changes manifested themselves until the return of democracy in 1983. But these changes changed their path in 1989, and up to the present time this deviation has left us in uncertainty of how they will develop in the future.

The road to democratization

Alfonsín administration was conditioned by three circumstances: a) the Armed Forces, b) the violation of Human Rights, and c) the economic situation. There can be no doubt that these were three pervading problems throughout his time in government. The president adopted a position with the members of the military elite that was more rigid than the one the Peronists would have adopted if they had won the elections². The Peronist party opposed the government from the Cámara de Senadores (Senate), where it represented the majority, by repelling laws that needed to be urgently passed. One of the most important episodes was the case of the new Unionist Law, which granted unionist minorities some acknowledgement, and would bring about the decentralization of the administration of Union funds. This in turn prompted the CGT (Confederación General del Trabajo - General Labor Confederation) to show its disapproval by means of noisy strikes against the government. These strikes were carried out supposedly to protest against the economic situation, but they evidently had a political tinge. Alfonsín succeeded in keeping his head over water through the increasing turmoil. In the Parliamentary elections of 1985, Radicals retained their majority in the Cámara de Diputados (House of Representatives from each province), because the divided Peronists continued to lose the support of the middle class. However, in the provincial elections of 1987, the Peronist candidates to

¹ Oscar Alende withdrew from the UCRI-Union Civica Radical Intransigente (Intransigent Civic Radical Union), whose main figure was Frondizi.

² During the political campaign, Alfonsín accused the Peronists of consorting with the military. Nevertheless, it should be noted that since the Revolución Libertadora (Freedom Revolution) in 1955 in general the military coups used to proscribe Peronism. In spite of these contradictions, it is clear that Radicals kept a more democratic attitude, while Peronists were more combative and were not open to agreements and to the democratic building of the country.

Congress won over the Radicals by 41% against 37%, and they extended their influence to nearly all the provincial governments.

Economy turned out to be the hardest problem to solve. Following the failure of his first measures, in 1985 Alfonsín summoned a team of technicians led by Juan Sourrouille. They elaborated an economic plan called "Plan Austral." In the beginning, this Plan was successful, inflation decreased to 1-2% a month, and confidence was returning.¹ But this stability did not last long and there was a succession of economic plans ("Australito" and "Plan Primavera") which failed in decreasing inflation. Finally, in February 1989, the political situation worsened, even when the next president - Menem - had already been chosen and there were only some months left for Alfonsín's administration.² The outlook of a violent and aggressive Peronism forced some private sectors to start buying dollars and keeping products from the markets. This situation, together with the problems caused by the economic plan, speculation, and a succession of Economy Ministers who were not able to handle the crisis, unleashed hyperinflation.³ Hyperinflation forced the Radical government to resign and give way to the recently elected president, Dr. Carlos Saul Menem.⁴

Peronism in power: Carlos Saul Menem

As he took office as President, Menem had all the reasons at hand to alter his political course dramatically. He consorted with the Right wing to appease the political and economic situation by appointing Nestor Rapanelli - a representative of Bunge y Born, Argentina's most important grain exporter, as Economy Minister and Domingo Cavallo as Foreign Affairs Minister. He also appointed Alvaro Alsogaray as a Government Consultant, thus consolidating a liberal position in his administration. This came to upset some sectors of Peronism that did not like Menem's attitude. Unions, which were fully Peronist, showed their disapproval and this caused a division within the CGT. Thus, the unions' political influence weakened against the upward movement of private companies.⁵

In our view, this new economic policy reflected the situation of some European parties - similar to Peronism in that they were low-class based. These parties were forced by the international economic situation to consort with their previous enemies and to launch measures that contained many elements of the liberal capitalism from the last years of the last century. The dismemberment of

¹ Ferrucci (1991).

² Ossona (1992).

³ Vitelli (1999).

⁴ Beckerman (1990).

⁵ We have to take into account that unions were the mobilising power of Peronism, but with Menem they declined and in many cases even consorted with him.

the Soviet welfare state - beginning with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 - constituted another reason for Argentina's new political orientation. The lack of efficiency in the administration of the State, which had been going on for decades, had brought about a favorable predisposition in the middle and higher classes towards the privatization of state-run companies, which were causing a great fiscal deficit.

About this, Torcuato Di Tella comments: "As regards this topic, attitudes were often contradictory. For instance, in 1986, most people in the urban centers thought that the State should control prices (83%) and impose a freeze on rents (75%), and that it should provide a job for every person in need as well (83%). This was the argument behind believing in the action of the State when that represented a personal benefit, without necessarily thinking about the possible setbacks or secondary consequences. At the same time, however, there was a general belief in the greater efficiency of the private companies against the state-run ones. In a survey carried out in 1990, 78% of people believed that it was better if most of the companies were in private hands, and a 71% believed that it was more urgent to increase production than to insist on a proper distribution."¹

After he had announced the measures he would take, Menem's popularity increased. In spite of this, the relation between the two sectors of orthodox Peronism deteriorated. Some decided to separate from the Peronist party - the so-called "Grupo de los ocho" (The eight group), but in elections they were not able to fulfill their expectations.

In January 1990, the Economy Minister, Erman Gonzalez, surprised the population by changing the money deposited in banks by bonds with high interest rates due in ten years, thus literally confiscating the savings of the middle class in what was called "Plan Bonex."

This and other measures did not stop prices from increasing, so hyper-inflation continued. Going against the basic principles of classic Peronism, Menem and his ministers launched a privatization program, selling state-run companies to private investors. In June 1990, he sold ENTEL, the state-run telephone company, to a holding of French, Italian and Spanish investors. In July 1990, he sold Aerolineas Argentinas (Argentinean Airlines) to Spanish Iberia, and he also announced that he intended to privatize electricity, coal, natural gas, the railways, and the State's marine fleet too. From that moment on, the neo-liberal economic policy seemed to have succeeded. In 1991, Domingo Cavallo was appointed Economy Minister. He extended the privatization campaign, which earned the government several million dollars in 1994. He centered his program in the "Ley de Convertibilidad" (Convertibility Law) that reduced

¹ Di Tella and Tocuato, op.cit.

public expenditure according to income, forbade the emission of currency and finally established a 1 to 1 correspondence between the Argentinean peso and the American dollar. The confidence in the currency became the key of economic credibility and helped a significant increase in the arrival of foreign investment. Cavallo also elaborated a change in the payment schedule of the foreign debt in 1992 - "Plan Brady", while the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund supported his deep economic measures. Finally, inflation decreased from a 4900% a year in 1989 to less than 4% a year in 1994, thus getting to an economic development rate of 6% a year. This process was called by the main international economic thinkers "The Argentinean economy miracle."

What did the "Plan de Convertibilidad" consist of?

The "Plan de Convertibilidad" (Convertibility Plan) was born out of the need of setting rigid rules in a country coming out of continuous crises and a long history of inflation. By putting this plan into practice, the inflation rates reduced dramatically to the normal levels of developed countries. The tax on inflation was eliminated, credit returned - long-term and with low interest rates - and there was a general belief that income was continuously increasing, and, more importantly, there was a favorable international context as regards interest rates for loans. This context brought about a development of demand and of internal economic activity, particularly in Latin American countries. The crisis of 1995 ("Tequila effect" and the crisis in Southeast Asia) evidenced that the previous growth had caused an imbalance in the foreign debt that was hardly viable in time. This was the consequence of the increase in demand in a context where related prices were highly distorted. Some of this policy was only an electoral maneuver, and some of it aimed at promoting investment, thus increasing productivity.

This distortion of related prices, caused by confidence in the currency, reduced the possibility to compete, and here the Argentinean experience differs from that of Chile and Southeast Asia. In these two cases, the favorable currency gave exports the dynamic element of growth, but this was not the case in Argentina. The Argentinean economic model did not increase the possibility of competition or the exports. It turned out to be much more harmful in terms of social situation and employment, because it excluded a large part of the population. In addition, it could not hold with a structure of related prices that had nothing to do with its starting point, and that lacked the necessary tools for a renewal in both economy and labor.¹

¹ Machinea (1998).

This Plan lacked the specific policies that are necessary in the field of production and social compensation. It did not have any policy aimed at prompting small and medium-size companies to export, or to develop new technologies so that they could revitalize their industry. The lack of measures that should increase demand of workforce raised certain doubts about the viability of growth and caused a regressive distribution of income. To all this, we must add the government's failure to create policies to compensate the social harm done by the Plan, and the process of change within the State. The consequences were an increasing exclusion of large portions of the population and a marked polarization of society.

Another important change during Menem's first administration took place in 1994, when the government was granted Congress approval to amend the National Constitution. As was agreed between Menem and Alfonsín,¹ by means of the amendments, the time in office would be reduced from 6 to 4 years, but re-election would be allowed; the authority of the president to rule through emergency decrees was limited; and there would be created the office of "Jefe de Gabinete" (Head of Ministers). The person appointed for this office could be removed by the majority vote of Congress.² The amendments also strengthened the Judicial Power and granted autonomy to the City of Buenos Aires. The advocates of this constitutional reform insisted that the amendments could improve government responsibility, by decentralizing power and instituting a new check and balance system.

It is interesting to consider under this light the process of amending the Constitution. For the political science, this process is a very interesting one, due to the dynamics that came into play during its different stages. Following the trend of the neo-contractualist positions in current political science, we could say that an amendment to the Constitution implies a reformulation of the social contract between those who govern and those who are governed. From the perspective of liberal democracy, in a process of amendment many things come into play, mainly the terms under which society shares its sovereignty in the political sphere, the procedures to do this, its rights, and the way government is to be conducted. But Constitutions might have a further function above the one of establishing what actions are to be allowed and which are not. Constitutions should also have the function of creating availability of power, turning a political system into a continuous source of active power to carry out social transformation projects. This can only be done by those who have legitimacy and knowledge, so that political participation of citizens can be increased.³

¹ Radical Party leader.

² This introduced Parliamentary authority.

³ Wolin (1981).

The policy of generating power has been historically determined by a system of added benefits. Power, in any society, is an important resource that society itself has to generate. We believe that the Argentine society has lost great amounts of power from the times of the return to democracy in 1983 to present time. There have been many signs that show a growing lack of interest in public affairs. Among these, we can mention the general feeling of disappointment about politics, the wearing out of the politicians' credibility, the stiffness of the participation procedures, and finally, the surveys carried out on the population in recent years. In this context, it is necessary to assess the amendments carried out in 1994, in relation to the possible solutions to the problems we have described. We think it is important to take into account how costly it was to carry out the immense political effort necessary to amending the Constitution. It was a very high price to pay, we could even say unique in the institutional history of any country. Even today, it is difficult to assess what was the actual cost of this amendment. A clear example is the division of Radicalist leaders into those who were for the agreement and those who were against it. This division was just the tip of the iceberg for a party in deep crisis, forced to choose between the agreement and a possible defeat in the coming plebiscite. The process of amendment can be seen from many different perspectives. One of them is the basic expectations that led to it, although it would not be enough to consider this as the most important aspect. In this respect we do not think we are mistaken in saying that the final outcome of this amendment, born out of an agreement between two political parties, was only a manifestation of this agreement and it did not show a one and coherent logic. Nevertheless, we believe that this was not the main flaw in the amendment. What we can say is that, in this process, many problems were solved by means of transactions between two amendment projects that had originated in expectations that were not only different, but also in many cases even contradictory. The amendment agreement was only that, and not an agreement in government. It was bound to finish only in the passing of some sections of the law and the withdrawal of a Supreme Court judge. The laws necessary to putting into practice the control measures proposed by Radicalism were only a bunch of disconnected and complicated rules. As it was, they were mostly implemented through some unimportant laws in a Congress where Radicalism did not represent a majority. In exchange, they only received the possibility of re-election in the hands of a Peronist president.¹

Leaving aside the peculiarities of the process in Argentina, we have to consider certain aspects when evaluating the amendment to the Constitution. The main source of problems related to the expectations around this amendment was the idea of a lighter Presidencialist system. To deepen our analysis we first need

¹ Chalmers (1977).

to look at the characteristics attributed to this system.¹ The system, which has been widely analyzed by specialized authors in Latin America, tends to favor the Executive power over the other powers in government. Abusing this characteristic has led presidents in different circumstances and places to obtain great power, thus invading the sphere of the other powers. Despite this, the idea of a lighter Presidentialist system has some obscure aspects that we deem interesting to clarify. The Presidentialist system not only includes the Executive Power, it includes other powers in government and the governmental agencies controlled by it. Of course, the system has certain limitations. For example, the best possibility of the opposing party lies in waiting for the failure of the current government, or better, the disintegration of the ruling party.

Finally, we would like to consider the need to draw attention to the almost automatic association between the Presidentialist system and the bipartisan system. This association can be put down to the fact that while the winning party takes all the power, the options tend to polarize among those having more possibilities.

In our view, the Argentinean political system is in for future conflict, which will affect the quality of the democracy that is being built. The reforms on the Legislative and Judicial power will have some effect in the middle and long term, but they will not be enough to eliminate those problems that brought them to their current state.

The true function of the Head of Ministers is far from clear. There are certain similarities between this office and the system of the Republic of Weimar - the name given to Germany after World War I. Here two fronts were threatening with removing the premier: the president and the Congress. Under the circumstances, it was very difficult to follow any government plan. Trying to soften the Presidentialist system, lest the governmental crisis should become a crisis in the whole system, the plan ended up causing never-ending conflict between the powers of State.

To sum up, the most important changes in Menem's policy the Convertibility Plan, the privatization plan and the amendments to the Constitution - were not as efficient as they should have been in solving the socioeconomic problems of the country.

But there were also negative aspects that can be blamed on Radicalism, for instance the fact that the amendment to the Constitution implied Menem's continuity in office. This being so, the privatization plan continued, following the neo-liberal economic model. Entire towns that had developed thanks to the exploitation of non-renewable resources such as oil and gas were devastated.

¹ Riggs (1988).

Their inhabitants had worked under the protection of national companies, and when these were gone; their situation became critical because there were no jobs available for them. The measures proposed regarding education and health produced antagonism between the provincial governments and Unions, causing outbreaks of violence.¹

In Argentina, the deep changes of the last years have altered the power of action of the basic institutions in society, due to a weakening in the power of the State. The State, currently pervaded by a heavy bureaucracy and in need of technical support, has difficulties in answering the claims of society.² Although Congress is still the gravitational centre of the political system, the independent institutions represent a possibility created by society itself. These institutions represent a link between the political system and the social sphere of the "Tercer Sector" (Third Sector), in a new attempt to achieve social development.³

The capacity to rule and the Third Sector

The capacity to rule is an elusive concept, its definition and even its existence depending on the confidence each society has in its government and in the process that makes it possible. In today's world, and particularly in Argentina and Latin America, the issue of the capacity to rule is again under the spotlight.

Those Latin American countries that could never guarantee the capacity to rule, even when they had achieved certain growth, are currently facing a sad picture: growth is being threatened by political turmoil. Consequently, the capacity to rule in the political arena is now becoming an important element of the context under which development is possible.⁴ This issue is often seen only under the light of the government's ability to manage development, but legitimacy and governmental stability depend on more than that. In order to understand this concept fully, we need to examine a number of processes. The most important of them are those related to the strengthening of society, civic culture development, economic orientations, and behavior, and the inclusion of larger portions of the population in the production system.⁵

The economic policy also determines the capacity to rule. In the first place, the characteristics and efficiency of the economic model affect the conditions under which the capacity to rule develops. The context in which the industrialized countries could be governed in the past was characterized by economic growth, social prosperity, and state intervention. Things would have

¹ Fernandez and Gaveglia (1998).

² Programa de Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo (1998b).

³ Fernandez. Arturo/ Silvia Gaveglia, op. cit.

⁴ Tomassini (1993).

⁵ Tomassini (1992).

been different in a context of slow economic development, reduction of public expenditure, consumption and credit, and State shrinkage. In the second place, these conditions and consequently the capacity to rule, depend on the economic model in force. In the case of Argentina and other Latin American countries, the difference is that these are still developing countries, and they had to learn how to handle their political and institutional systems in only two centuries of autonomy. They inherited the political structure of the colonizing countries that were rich in tradition and experience. This immaturity and the lack of institutional stability are only some of the differences that Latin America presents. To sum up, we could say that, since they gained their independence, Latin American countries inherited European civic culture. Nevertheless, in most cases, this was only restricted to the ruling classes, and worse, only during the early years.¹

In the last decades, Latin American economies have tended to adopt an economic model based on the change of the production system, technological modernization and an opening to foreign markets, followed by an increased ability to compete internationally. Latin American societies have accepted that it is necessary to follow this model. Regrettably, a rigid implementation, lack of power of decision or efficiency would impair the capacity to rule in these countries. We could say then that the capacity to rule depends on the concurrence of many elements, such as the ability to maintain the system stable. The assurance that the strategy can be continued in time is also vital, even when this means protecting it from the unfair austerities imposed by the internal and international oligarchy over the majority, or from dangerous popular reactions.²

The capacity to rule does not originate in or depend on the efficiency, honesty and transparency of the State, but on a national agreement on the one hand, and stability, growth and moral integration on the other hand. Among the possible measures to adopt we find: the decentralization of State action, privatization of state-run companies, outsourcing of certain services, deregulation of certain areas in economy, strengthening of private companies and modernizing workforce-management relations within them, and finally assuming public responsibilities. Some of these measures are already being taken in Latin America and Argentina. The reform of the State is being carried out according to a number of parameters.³ These are: the strengthening of civil society, a tendency towards political pluralism, the consolidation of a dynamic market economy, and social integration based on the inclusion of the largest possible number of citizens in the production process.

¹ Tirado (1997).

² Londofio and Moser (1996).

³ Diaz (1996)

In Argentina, the latest changes have altered the potential functions of basic social institutions. Mass-media, private interests groups, and social demonstration practices are replacing the political parties that used to represent the link between government and population. One of the greatest divides is the one that separates the political system from society. It is clearly necessary to reinforce the bond between the political representatives and the social and economic institutions. The State, pervaded by a heavy bureaucracy and in need of technical support, has problems in answering the claims of society.¹ Although Parliament is still the gravitational centre of the political system, a new opening for intermediary institutions can be seen at the very core of society.

There is clear evidence that a new participation culture is rising. There is wide agreement today regarding the relevance of the political and social institutions stability as the only way to reach a stable and strong democracy. Here we can see the importance of the political parties, of the institutions of society and of the Third Sector. Society's capacity to act has been almost completely destroyed in Argentina. Figures show that governmental support for education, health, and security is decreasing. In addition, there are high levels of unemployment and sub-employment. And even those who do have a job in many cases do not earn enough to full-fill their basic needs.²

This is a country where people, due to the lack of resources they suffer in young age, do not have the slightest possibility of reaching the educational standards necessary for competing on the job market. This is caused not only by lack of money, but also, in many cases, by malnutrition. The solution is not giving schools some computers, but fighting malnutrition. If this is not done, people will not be able to fit in a society that is increasingly competitive and sophisticated.³

It is important to highlight, however, that malnutrition is not only an Argentinean problem. It is a worldwide problem, and is even more serious in Latin America. The golden age of neo-liberalism as the economic policy of the Latin American governments led to this situation. Different political parties do not have great differences as regards this issue, and although they may seem to have opposite orientations, most of them have adopted neo-liberalism as principle. An exception to this, however, is the Argentinean president, Nestor Kirchner, who was elected in 2003. Liberalism is supposed to be a doctrine that encourages economic growth, while taking technical progress from the high to the lower classes. After having tried it for some time, we can say that these ideas are mistaken, and we have the argument of reality to support our opinion. Neo-liberal policies cannot be applied anymore, they are twenty years old and are

¹ PNUD (1998)

² Basic needs mean all those products that are necessary for subsistence and do not include any luxury product. See Ferrucci (1991).

³ Banco Mundial (2001).

showing signs of decline. This is not a mere debate about theories: facts themselves are claiming for a change. For example, according to neo-liberal ideas, it is important and necessary to promote a free market economy. Doing this, competence is encouraged and this in turn makes prices go down, thus improving the standard of living. This idea has not worked at all in Argentina for the last ten years.

From now on, we need to pay close attention to what is happening in Argentina. After 1990, Argentinean society has been trying to go back to the idea of a welfare state. This policy, that has shown many correctable flaws, has also shown that it can challenge the theories and practices of neo-liberal economic policy.

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